

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1244NEW YORK TIMES
1 December 1985

Seeking Cures for an Epidemic of Espionage

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WASHINGTON

It was a bittersweet week for the American intelligence community. In just nine days, three present or former employees of the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Defense Department have been arrested and charged with espionage.

The new cases, when added to seven similar ones, together with others involving the wife of one Defense Department employee, an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and an employee of the Northrop Corporation — all told, eleven of them discovered in this unprecedented year of espionage arrests — have caused “immense damage,” a senior Administration official said. And other officials say that even more suspected spies may be arrested soon.

At the same time, though, after years of complaints that America's spy catchers were inadequate, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is catching spies. “We're outmanned” by Soviet bloc intelligence officers, said Phillip Parker, assistant director of the bureau's counterintelligence branch, “but we're not outfought.”

A White House official said the numerous espionage cases of the last several months offered “a silver lining” because they raised public concern, enabling the Administration to obtain approval for a variety of counterintelligence proposals that earlier had been promoted without success. Among them are further restrictions on Soviet bloc diplomats in the United States and the increased use of polygraph testing.

Presidential Priority

In his radio address yesterday, President Reagan said: “Some of you may be wondering if the large number of spy arrests in recent weeks means that we are looking harder or that there are more spies to find. Well, I think the answer to both questions is yes.” But in fact, few of the new counterintelligence initiatives announced over the last few months is in place. The Defense Department has cut by 10 percent the number of people cleared to handle classified materials; there were 4.3 million last summer. Even Pentagon officials acknowledge that that step is not likely to cause Soviet spies to lose much sleep.

Intelligence experts attribute the spate of new arrests largely to coincidence and to Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the Soviet defector who returned to Russia last month, though not before providing the names of “scores” of Soviet agents and contacts around the world, a Government official said. Mr. Yurchenko is said to have told United

States officials about Ronald W. Pelton, a former National Security Agency employee accused of spying for Russia. He was arrested Monday.

Also last week, law enforcement officials said Larry Wu-Tai Chin, a retired C.I.A. analyst charged with espionage, acknowledged that he had given a wide range of highly sensitive secrets to China for more than 30 years. And associates said Jonathan Jay Pollard, a civilian Pentagon employee charged with spying in Israel's behalf, bragged for a decade that he had been working for Israel. As the Israeli Government tried to prevent diplomatic damage from the case, it recalled from Washington two diplomats who allegedly had connections with Mr. Pollard.

Although the Pollard case raised serious diplomatic concerns, officials said Mr. Pelton apparently caused the most damage. His former employer, the N.S.A., is the largest and most secretive of the nation's intelligence-gathering agencies. Its photo-reconnaissance satellites and long-range eavesdropping devices provide more than 80 percent of America's intelligence information. Officials fear that Mr. Pelton told the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency, what some of them can do. They said the affair appears similar to the William Kampiles case of 1979.

Mr. Kampiles was a low-level C.I.A. employee convicted of espionage for selling the Soviet Union, for \$3,000, a manual for the nation's most sophisticated photo-reconnaissance satellite, the KH-11. Before the KH-11, intelligence officials said, American reconnaissance satellites took photographs and ejected film cartridges that were retrieved by high-flying planes equipped with large nets. By the time the film was retrieved and processed and the prints were distributed, “the Soviets had 24 to 36 hours, time they could use to change things, move things around, make things disappear,” said Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, the New York Democrat who was vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The KH-11 — in essence, an orbiting television camera that transmits images to ground stations instantly — gave the United States what is called “real-time” coverage. When it was first used, an intelligence official said, the Soviets were unaware of the new United States capability; planes with nets were still sent up occasionally. From Mr. Kampiles, the Russians learned of the new technology, and “it was a huge piece of information for them,” Senator Moynihan said. “They knew they couldn't hide anymore.”

Intelligence officials say they believe Mr. Pelton may have given away secrets just as valuable. If he did and the Soviet Union has known what the United States was doing, “they could have fed us reams of false information for years,” one official said. “We have a lot of backtracking to do.”